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Telling Ourselves Sideways, Crooked and Crip: An Introduction

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Stories about us are boring. As predictable and ubiquitous as they are dangerous, normate narrations of our lives are as straight as they come: one-dimensional narratives of tragic loss and/or progressive normativity. We are dying or overcoming. We become a burden or an inspiration. We desire vindication or marriage. Our entire narrative worlds are defined by our Otherness, yet revolve around the normates and the normative. These stories cut straight to the point, using—and used as—well-steeped, easily readable metaphors bolstered by the requisite piano-based musical cues. If we didn't know us better, we would bore us.

We (Josh and Danielle) have caught ourselves telling these stories. Sometimes as normate party tricks, sometimes for paychecks, and sometimes for our daily survival: to access that medical tool; to evade that medical intervention; to escape that 100th awkward conversation. We told these stories, mostly, before we knew that we could tell other stories; that we could make up our own stories; that we could tell them to each other; that our stories create the very *us* they tell; that *how* we tell our stories matters. We told these stories, mostly, before we came across those who told themselves otherwise.

Telling our individual and communal selves otherwise has been a pivotal move for many Mad, Deaf, neurodiverse, disability, sick, and crip activists and communities over the last century (Charlton 1998; Clare 1999; Gannon 2011; Sins Invalid 2016). Doing so makes a bold epistemological claim about the value of experiential, embodied, and community-created knowledges in a context where medical, charitable, eugenic, inspirational, and colonial discourses attempt to straighten us, and our stories, out. Although crip story-telling inevitably

draws off of experience, the stories are more than the experience itself. These stories are catalyzed by experience. These stories analyze, unpack, and critique experience. These stories leverage experience to "generate visions of the body and desire and community that are in excess of attempts to contain and manage us'' (Peers, Brittain and McRuer 2012). Drawing on this history, for this special issue, we have chosen works that mobilize experience methodologically: in order to critique and challenge and disrupt entire fields of knowledge about us; and in order to crip and create new ways of knowing, performing, desiring, experiencing, and researching our 'selves' (Butler 2001; Scott 1992; Foucault 2004).

In their contribution, "Stories of Methodology: Interviewing Sideways, Crooked and Crip," Margaret Price and Stephanie Kerschbaum offer a prime example of this: a duo-ethnographic webtext as a methodology for cripping qualitative methodology. They write:

> We're bursting with our own stories, too, because we've learned that two disabled researchers conducting a collaborative interview study with disabled faculty is anything but simple. This webtext includes some stories from our interviewees, but it is primarily the story(ies) of us as researchers, finding our way as we go, moving sideways and crooked and crip into an interdependent disability-studies (DS) methodology. (16)

In other words, at the heart of every contribution in this special issue is a self-storying. This storying, in each case, is not straight-forward. They are complex stories, from the margins of our own movements,

stories of community,

and complexity,

and complicity,

and vulnerability,

and beauty,

and violence,

and resistance,

and generativity,

and desire.

In her contribution, "Loose Leaf," Lindsay Eales draws on various formats of performative writing, crip and Mad theory, and personal experience to de-compose the acts of living and writing madness. This evocative work engages not only with psychiatrized aspects of her queer-Mad life, but also with how madness (in)forms important relationships, life events, affects, and desires. She writes: "I revel in what I had judged ugly. I want to be disjointed, unformed, messy, hurting, mad" (50).

Importantly, however, the authors in this special issue are not only telling different disability stories, they are telling these stories differently. Robert McRuer (2006) argues that reimagining disability and disability communities in generative ways requires, in part, that we reorientate ourselves away from compulsory ideals shaped by and within straight forms of composition. What might it mean to break form and "get the story crooked" (Kellner xi)? What might it mean to stutter composition itself, creating "gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" (McRuer 157). We asked for submissions that engaged in playful, non-normative, experiential, and experimental formats and that use such de-compositional forms to create/explore crip knowledges, enactments, aesthetics, and corporealities.

We were not disappointed.

We accepted contributions in the form of poetic texts, performative texts, web-texts, multi-voiced texts, confessional texts, and—in the case of Joëlle Rouleau's stunning contribution—video-based engagements that represent the un(der)represented in (and through) Quebecois film. Many of the contributions are many kinds of texts all at once. Agnieszka Forfa's evocative poem, "invite in. go steady crazy," for example, can be read as a deeply personal meditation about (dis)connection, existence and survival. At the same time, it can be read as a set of deeply embodied performative instructions: "Dig a hole beside the tree, bury your psych pills there and come back when things feel hard. Thank the tree, because this is not a gift" (13. Forfa, like numerous contributors to this special issue, used both form and content to theorize and enact crip/mad/autistic time, while challenging progress, linearity, and the straight-forward cadence of academic prose. Forfa mobilizes dropped lines of poetry to insert breath and pause, as well as offering more formal propositions: "Slow down to the pace of houseplants" and later, "If the pace of the plants still feels too fast, slow down to the pace of the rock" (13).

As Alison Kafer (2013) usefully argues, cripping time is sometimes about slowing things down to the speed of accommodation, translation, or depression. Crip time is also, however, about the stalls and starts that Daniel Martin analyzes in his contribution "Stuttering from the Anus." It is about non-linearity, injected into Price and Kerschbaum's webtexts through embedded links: including a link about how disabled researchers crip the time of qualitative methods. It is about living in multiple times at once, as Benham and Kizer explore through their duo-ethnography—shifting, mid-sentence, between voices and contexts and periods. Crip time is about the speeding down and slowing up, dipping and twisting of time, represented in Benham and Kizer as well as Eales' use of performative word art. Crip time is also about the non-progressive, non-linear experiences of mad-times and lifetimes, which Lindsay Eales invites

through her opening instructions to shuffle the pages: to read each page of her performative writing in random order.

The contributions to this special issue, in other words, engage with non-normative academic forms for telling our selves in order not only to crip the linear time of academic prose, but also to tangle and warp the curative temporalities (Kafer 2013) that make many of our lives illegible, or at times unlivable. In telling themselves sideways, crooked and crip these authors proclaim the undesirability—and even the impossibility—of telling ourselves straight.

The Impossibility of Telling Ourselves Straight

In her documentary "Réflexions sur la représentation du handicap retrouvée dans le cinéma Québécois," within this issue, Joëlle Rouleau highlights the political stakes of story-telling: "Representé. Un mot lourd de sense, de responsabilité. Qu'est ce que ça implique de représenter? Je me cherche dans les representations, et je me trouve pas. Est-ce que c'est même important de se retrouver? Si oui pour qui? Pourquoi?" In asking throughout the film whose stories get told and whose are buried by ableist and neo-colonial structures of power, Rouleau not only opens space to reclaim cultural representation but troubles the very idea and politics of representation. To put the matter simply: is it possible to find oneself in representation? To do so must we not, to some degree, narrate our lives through culturally recognizable and oppressive norms?

Judith Butler is interested in a similar set of questions in "Giving an Account of Oneself" (2001), wherein she explains that any attempt to narrate our lives, and thus produce a coherent "I," must be recognizable and intelligible. This demand that we articulate ourselves through cultural norms of intelligibility creates immediate trouble for any notion of the self as stable and unified (able-bodied, neurotypical, and sanest) and thus self-grounding. As Butler writes: "If I try

to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life, but this narrative will be disorientated by what is not mine, or what is not mine alone" (26). Within a society dominated by ableist discourses like Medicine, the necessity of telling ourselves through "what is not ours alone" can often be oppressive:

We are expected to orient our self-telling around Diagnosis

"What's wrong with you?"

We are expected to compose ourselves, starting with some defining Origin

"What happened to you?"

We are expected to compose ourselves within the progressive trajectory of Curative Time

"Are they working on a cure? Have you tried equine therapy? A SpeechEasy?"

Despite the discursive violence that can result from hegemonic interruptions, it is worth lingering with the trouble of interruption and disorientation a little longer. Ryan Parrey (2016) argues that "it is through disorienting encounters that existing meanings of disability are revealed and new meanings generated" (para. 4). This epistemology is explored by Jessica Benham and James Kizer in their contribution "Aut-ors of our Experience: Interrogating Intersections of Autistic Identity." Benham and Kizer's piece is often disorientating to read—if one tries to read it straight. Their narratives are continually layered, interrupted, and multi-voiced, representing their lived experiences of Autism. If their lived experience is neither linear nor smooth, then why should their stories be? As they write: "we move between *being there* and *being here*, to relive the past and to reinterpret its meaning in the present, but we also move between *self* and *other*,

not only sharing our own story but seeing how it intertwines, spins, moves, with the story of anOther" (65). The difficulty of following their story in a straight line (along with its intentional subversion of academic norms) can leave normate readers deeply uncomfortable— leaving the reader confronted with the pleasures and disorientations of reading crip.

Yet consider that for Butler, such encounters of interruption and disorientation are not hurdles to overcome in an act of self-mastery, but are the very ground of subjectivity and our ethical relations with one another. It is at the very moment we attempt to tell a seamless or fluent story of ourselves that it diffracts through "what is not mine, or what is not mine alone" and that we find ourselves given over to, implicated with, and constituted by the Other. Story-tellers are bent, crooked, turned sideways *by the very effort* of telling ourselves and others straight. A crip reading wraps this argument in flesh: it is our bodies and minds that *refuse* to tell the story straight. The point for Butler is not to celebrate incoherence but to appreciate its critical opening. Recognizing the limits of self-knowledge, "I find that my very formation implicates the Other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others" (37). The opaqueness of the self entails that "we are not precisely bounded, not precisely separate" (39) but co-implicated with others in a matrix of reciprocal vulnerability and responsibility. We are, like Benham and Kizer's work, or the work of Price and Kerschbaum in this issue, deeply and inextricably co-authored (cf. Davis 2002).

Although Butler may not desire incoherence for itself, we crips can find mischievous delight in these spaces. In his contribution "Stuttering from the Anus," Daniel Martin breaks down the distinction between a celebration of incoherence and a crip politic to engage in revelry as a practice of de-composition. This psychoanalytic auto-ethnography (or better, this perverse confession) aims to detach speech from its privileged and rational place in the mouth to imagine

the material and encrusted "thingness" of stuttering. As he writes: "The anus is a portal to the other. If we let the stutter come from it, we free it from its imprisonment in our own bodies (in our own private worlds), or at the very least we relocate it away from the mouth or the brain where others would prefer it remain" (105). The mouth and the brain are the sanitized realm of straight stories and story-tellers. Situating speech in the anus is to recognize a radical intra-corporeality (Fritsch 2015) at the heart of our relations that renders straight and autonomous tellings impossible. As such, Martin argues:

> Here's my ultimate thesis for anyone with dysfluent speech: spew your shit. Let your speech stutter from the anus. Don't preach inclusivity, awareness, or acceptance; such weak emancipatory goals are thoroughly infused with pedagogical desires for fluency. A demand to be heard is a demand for fluency (105).

This is a caution against telling ourselves straight and seeking to find ourselves in *and through* representation. The contributions in this special issue strike a different path, neither weaving stories on the hegemonic terms of ableism, neurotypicality, or fluency, nor seeking to gain mastery over "what is not ours or not ours alone." Rather, the utter impossibility of telling ourselves straight is an invitation for crip politics. De-composing ourselves through crooked and crip tellings is to cultivate the types of interruptions and disorientations through which we find ourselves given over and responsive to one another. "Just as coherent eugenic, genetic and biomedical disability stories produce disabled subjects in order to constrain, eradicate and normalise them," Danielle Peers (2012) argues, "de-composition can break down the coherence of these stories and selves, opening up room for more critical and diverse engagements with ideas, practices, communities and identities" (186).

We thus welcome readers of this special issue to dwell with the incoherences, the critical dysfluencies (St. Pierre 2015), the multiplication of voices and selves, the creative de-composition of these Mad, Autistic, Deaf and crip selves being self-storied. We invite you to engage sideways, crooked, and crip. Shuffle the pages. Explore the links. Experiment with reading multi-voiced texts in new ways. Engage with access as multi-voiced. Take in the audio-described, captioned, French video—especially si vous parlez pas français. (Screen)-read the poem and listen to its accompanying MP3. Revel in the failures, overlaps, and gaps. Crip politics grow (from the middle) through stories and tellers de-composed—they create sideways futures that resist coherence, a becoming that can be neither anticipated nor controlled but can be lived, storied, and desired, together.

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